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## REVIEWS

### POETRY OF THE NORTH-AMERICAN INDIAN

*The Path on the Rainbow—An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America.* Edited by George W. Cronyn, with Introduction by Mary Austin. Boni and Liveright.

The publication of this book is an event, since here for the first time the subject of Indian poetry is presented to us squarely on its own merits. Before this, if one wanted to know anything of Indian verse one had to search through the scientific and often non-literary treatises in the publications of the Bureau of Ethnology, or be content with the sort of intermittent treatment of the subject found in books devoted to a more general consideration of Indian life. But in this book, Indian poetry is presented to us as an art, rather than as an ethnological curiosity. This does not mean, of course, that the ethnologists have not performed a very great service in preserving these authentic Indian poems for us, but only that their point of view is not that of the artist or poet, and that it has remained, and still remains, for the artist and poet to interpret adequately many phases of Indian expression. The way in which this book has eventually crystallized, so to speak, is in itself indicative of a growing perception on our part of the literary and artistic value of Indian motives. Many minds, working separately, almost in the dark as it were, and along individual paths, have here come together to present what is a genuine contribution to contemporary literature.

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And contemporary the book is in every sense of the word. Not only is the American Indian a contemporary of ours—a fact too often lost sight of through the use of such terms as “the vanishing race” or that other colorless and far-distant-sounding word “aboriginal”—but his poetry is very much of our time. Whether it is the spirit of the land reacting upon our poets to make them like the earliest owners of the soil and sky, or whether it is due to some other cause, certain it is that these Indian poems are very similar in spirit and method to the poetry of our most modern American poets. Stephen Crane would have qualified as an Indian poet, and in the *Mid-American Chants* of Sherwood Anderson one finds almost precisely the mood of the songs accompanying the green corn dances of the pueblo Indians.

Another thing that gives the book its amazing freshness and contemporary feeling is the fact that many of the translators have not been “literary” (in the pseudo sense) and have not attempted to “gloss” the poems with poetic phrasing—invariably trite. The result, often enough, is far more effective for just this reason. Paradoxically, the ethnologist, who usually is not interested in the literary quality of the Indian’s mind as such, has, because of the very literalness of his reaction, preserved the spirit of the original as one less disinterested in this respect could hardly have done. The translations of the Chippewa songs by Miss Frances Densmore, for instance, are notably excellent, and Miss Densmore, as a musician primarily interested in the music, was content to set down the bare image given her by

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the Indian. The result is authentic to a degree not often achieved. Also Dr. Washington Matthews' renditions of the Navajo *Mountain Chant* impress us with the same feeling of essential authenticity, and one could mention the work of other translators in which the same faculty of direct transcription is evident.

One chief danger of translation, of course, is the tendency to Europeanize the original, and against this the translator must be continuously on guard. Another danger, as noted above, is in the form given to the fluid content furnished by the Indian. When an Indian song is translated to read like an Elizabethan poem or Spenserian stanza, one instinctively feels that the essence of the original has somehow escaped, or been smothered by the translator. Of course all translation is interpretive to a certain extent, and it is only with the most scrupulous care that the translator can keep from imposing upon the song some shade of meaning not inherent in the original. Again, translation, to be vital, must be abreast of the best contemporary expression; and translations which include the many awkward inversions and trite poetic phaseology of pseudo-poetic expression, of which the Indian himself is not guilty, fall notably short in this respect. The great advantage afforded by this volume, and this has never been furnished before, is the opportunity to compare the respective merits of the translators as well as the originals, and to determine for oneself just how far each has succeeded in capturing the essence of Indian thought and inspiration.

Fortunately for one's further illumination in this direction, Mrs. Austin's introduction to the book is in itself a

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contribution as important as the contents. One might have despaired of wishing for anything so adequately understanding of so much in Indian poetry that seemingly defies analysis; but the secret of Mrs. Austin's success is that she approaches the subject with the sensitive feeling of the poet combined with the lack of preconceived bias characteristic of the best scientific thought. Fortunately, too, she is not "sentimental" about the Indian. This is another danger which seems to assail the interpreter of Indian art. It is perhaps a natural reaction to the other extreme in this country, the attitude of the vast majority of our middle-class "barbarians"—including Indian agents, Indian commissioners and the like, who regard the Indian as a savage without culture, and his art a curiosity at best, and unrefined and uncivilized at worst, to be suppressed at all hazard. It is indeed hard for one who knows anything at all of the Indian's "inside" thought to speak without heat on this subject or escape the stigma of sentimentality in regard to the Indian. When one meets Comstock in the desert, the inclination to exalt the Indian by contrast is irresistible! Mrs. Austin's work, however, is characterized by moderation as well as discrimination, and she claims for the Indian only what he is. The key-note of her point of view may be found in a phrase from another article in which she says, "There is no such thing as primitive mind; there is only mind in a state of primitive limitation." I don't know just what state of limitation the mind of our Comstockian Indian officials may be in; but it is certainly not sufficiently innocent or beautiful to be called primitive!

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If I have touched only upon the outskirts of this book and given nothing of the heart of it, of the Indian poems themselves, it is only that from a mass so rich it is impossible to quote with any satisfaction. A review which would do justice to the subject would be a thesis in itself. Indian poetry has never reached an artificial stage, and when one says this one realizes something of the pristine freshness of this great fund of material. Mr. Cronyn has grouped his poems by regional divisions, and this is exceedingly wise, for the poems of the woodlands differ from the poems of the desert; the first are more lyrical, the latter more rhapsodic. Again the Plains Indians and the Indians of the Northwest coast have a touch of keen humor and satire and incisive philosophy. The Indians of the Southeast, the Cherokees, have many magic formulae, recalling the voodoo of the southern Negroes. Perhaps these tendencies may be significant. Of the poetry in general one may say that it is of a very high order, exhibiting many varieties of inspiration, often symbolic to a high degree but always vital and always human. "Cut deeply into any Indian poem," Mrs. Austin says, "and it yields that profound and palpitant humanism without which no literary art can endure."

The appreciative interpretation of the poetry of another race is largely, one must believe, a gift. The whole art character of the Indian is of course more Oriental than European. Perhaps that is why we have so long failed to appreciate it. It is possible that Indian poetry may be more closely allied to Chinese poetry than to that of any other

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race; it has the same realism, the same concrete simplicity, and acceptance of the commonplace experience, as well as the exceptional, as the material of poetry. There are also many points of similarity with Japanese verse, in spirit no less than in the brevity of many songs. And Mrs. Austin points out the pure Greek mode of a poem from the tribe of Tenasa on the shore of the Missi-sippu. So the American Indian stands revealed as a poet of no mean order.

One thing is sure: whatever else may be accomplished by this book, we must discard our nursery-period Fenimore-Cooper-Hiawatha, cigar-store-Indian impression of the Indian. He is not a bit like our naïve conception of him. He is much more interesting, and his personality more richly varied. As for his art, one gets some inkling of it in this book; but not the whole story. His theatrical art, of which many of these songs are a component part, is the finest thing we have in this country without exception, the most consummate, primal art. And our government can think of nothing better to do than to try to suppress it! But for those who know this art, in its fulness, with all its rich color and poetry and amazing symbolism, this book is correspondingly richer.

As an epilogue to the poems, Miss Constance Lindsay Skinner furnishes a brief essay on *The Indian as Poet*, of which the most outstanding feature is her picture of an old Indian:

The Indian water-song is poetry to me because of a memory: an old chief, his hair grayed and his broad brown face deepened by a hundred and ten years, his sightless eyes—almost hidden under

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sagging crinkled lids—raised to the wet air. He sat in his doorway—a low oval entrance in the trunk of his totem pole, which towered, with its grotesque carvings of finny and winged beasts, thirty feet into the fine misty rain that dropped, silent and opaque, on the earthen cliff, the sightless sea and the blind eyelids of the old chief. He seemed to have been sitting there since the day when the first rain fell and the gray sea first flapped her wings on the shore, as her weird brood fluttered from under them to roost on the totem pole.

In addition to the direct translations composing the body of the book, Mr. Cronyn has included a section of interpretations by Constance Lindsay Skinner, Mary Austin, Frank Gordon, Alice Corbin and Pauline Johnson. (One wishes that he had included also the Cherokee poems of John Gould Fletcher.) The translators include such well known names as Natalie Curtis, Alice Fletcher, Franz Boaz, Washington Matthews, John Peabody Harrington, Jeremiah Curtin and many others. And greatest of all, of course, are the unnamed Indian poets whose work speaks for them in these pages.

Incidentally it is a matter of some pride to the editors of POETRY that the immediate inspiration for the volume came, as Mr. Cronyn says in his preface, from the Indian number of the magazine published February, 1917.

A. C. H.

### JEAN UNTERMAYER'S BOOK

*Growing Pains*, by Jean Starr Untermeyer. B. W. Huebsch.

What the reviewers delight to call the "New Poetic Renaissance" is barely six years old, and already it contains not only matter for reflection, but food for melancholy. Ap-